

From: Davis, Alison [Davis.Alison@epa.gov]
Sent: 3/31/2020 10:25:11 PM
To: Chow, Alice [chow.alice@epa.gov]; Fiedler, Kerri [Fiedler.Kerri@epa.gov]; Jenkins, Brandi [Jenkins.Brandi@epa.gov]; Kelley, Jeff [kelley.jeff@epa.gov]; Koerber, Mike [Koerber.Mike@epa.gov]; Mitchell, Ken [Mitchell.Ken@epa.gov]; Mylott, Richard [Myllott.Richard@epa.gov]; Nitsch, Chad [Nitsch.Chad@epa.gov]; Ruvo, Richard [Ruvo.Richard@epa.gov]; Smith, Darcie [Smith.Darcie@epa.gov]; Smith, Mark A. [Smith.Marka@epa.gov]; Weinstock, Lewis [Weinstock.Lewis@epa.gov]; White, Terri-A [White.Terri-A@epa.gov]; Casso, Ruben [Casso.Ruben@epa.gov]; Davidson, Ken [Davidson.Ken@epa.gov]; Kim, Lena [Kim.Lena@epa.gov]; Scott, Gail [Scott.Gail@epa.gov]; Garcia, David [Garcia.David@epa.gov]; Washburn, Ben [washburn.ben@epa.gov]; Glass, Geoffrey [GLASS.GEOFFREY@EPA.GOV]
CC: Banon, Ysabel [Banon.Ysabel@epa.gov]; Diem, Art [Diem.Art@epa.gov]; Verhalen, Frances [verhalen.frances@epa.gov]; Olson, Kyle [Olson.Kyle@epa.gov]; Taheri, Diane [Taheri.Diane@epa.gov]; Hoyer, Marion [hoyer.marion@epa.gov]; Lancey, Susan [lancey.susan@epa.gov]; Bird, Patrick [Bird.Patrick@epa.gov]; Algae-Eakin, Amy [Algae-Eakin.Amy@epa.gov]; Robinson, Jeffrey [Robinson.Jeffrey@epa.gov]; Mooney, John [Mooney.John@epa.gov]; Bremer, Kristen [Bremer.Kristen@epa.gov]; Caparoso, Jennifer [Caparoso.Jennifer@epa.gov]; Chen, Xi [Chen.Xi@epa.gov]; Cozzie, David [Cozzie.David@epa.gov]; Jones, Rhea [Jones.Rhea@epa.gov]; Lassiter, Penny [Lassiter.Penny@epa.gov]; McBrien, Jenia [McBrien.Jenia@epa.gov]; McKelvey, Laura [McKelvey.Laura@epa.gov]; Noah, Greg [Noah.Greg@epa.gov]; Noonan, Jenny [Noonan.Jenny@epa.gov]; Rimer, Kelly [Rimer.Kelly@epa.gov]; Rodman, Sonja [Rodman.Sonja@epa.gov]; Sasser, Erika [Sasser.Erika@epa.gov]; Shappley, Ned [Shappley.Ned@epa.gov]; Shine, Brenda [Shine.Brenda@epa.gov]; Strum, Madeleine [Strum.Madeleine@epa.gov]; Terry, Sara [Terry.Sara@epa.gov]; Thurman, James [Thurman.James@epa.gov]; Wilson, Holly [Wilson.Holly@epa.gov]; Witt, Jon [Witt.Jon@epa.gov]; Siegel, Kathryn [siegel.kathryn@epa.gov]; Sieffert, Margaret [Sieffert.Margaret@epa.gov]; Chang, Alice [Chang.Alice@epa.gov]; Cain, Alexis [cain.alexis@epa.gov]; Spenillo, Justin [Spenillo.Justin@epa.gov]; Lavoie, Tegan [lavoie.tegan@epa.gov]; Waterson, Sara [Waterson.Sara@epa.gov]; Rinck, Todd [Rinck.Todd@epa.gov]; Davis, Amber [Davis.Amber@epa.gov]; Worley, Gregg [Worley.Gregg@epa.gov]; Lusky, Katy [Lusky.Kathleen@epa.gov]; Anderson, Seneca [Anderson.Seneca@epa.gov]; Browning, Debora [browning.debora@epa.gov]; Payne, James [payne.james@epa.gov]; Brashear, Angelina [Brashear.Angelina@epa.gov]; DeLuca, Isabel [DeLuca.Isabel@epa.gov]; Watkins, Nealson [Watkins.Nealson@epa.gov]
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<https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/2020/03/epa-is-failing-to-inform-residents-of-ethylene-oxide-risks-ig-warns-1908419>

EPA is failing to inform residents of ethylene oxide risks, IG warns

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By Annie Snider

The EPA has failed to warn people of the risks they face living near medical sterilization facilities and chemical plants that emit dangerous levels of a carcinogenic gas, the agency's inspector general said in an urgent warning issued Tuesday.

The Management Alert found that there are 25 operations in the U.S. emitting levels of ethylene oxide, a gas linked with lymphoid and breast cancers, at levels that produce an unacceptable risk of cancer. But, at 16 of those sites, neither state nor federal officials have met with the community to alert residents to the dangers.

EPA Inspector General Sean O'Donnell said in a letter to Associate Deputy Administrator Doug Benevento that he decided to issue the alert before concluding his office's audit of its air toxics program "because of the disparity in the extent and nature of communication between the EPA and impacted communities where the EPA has identified significant health risks to the public from ethylene oxide emissions."

The report recommends that EPA provide public meetings or other means of information exchange to residents near all 25 high-priority sites. EPA disagreed, arguing that the agency should complete more refined investigations into the risk at individual sites before conducting public outreach.

"EPA will continue to work with affected state and local air agencies to look more closely at emissions from facilities," Benevento said in a response to the IG's office. But, he cautioned, "we also wish to emphasize the complex, interrelated environmental and public health concerns around the use of ethylene oxide and hope your office understands both these concerns and that there is much more to learn about this chemical."

The IG's office requested a meeting with Benevento within 30 days. If the disagreement still doesn't get resolved, the administrator's office would have to begin the dispute resolution process.

Of the 25 high-priority facilities, 11 are commercial sterilizers and 14 are chemical plants. The majority of the facilities where public outreach has not been conducted are in Texas and Louisiana, and are primarily chemicals facilities.

Several states, including Illinois and Georgia, have cracked down on commercial sterilizing plants over concerns about ethylene oxide emissions. But the FDA has raised concerns that such moves could affect the availability of medical devices that are approved to be sterilized only using the chemical, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. Last week, Georgia agreed to temporarily increase production at sterilizing plants there.

The IG warning is based on a 2014 finding by EPA staff scientists with the Integrated Risk Information System that ethylene oxide is dangerous at far lower levels of exposure than previously thought. But industry has challenged EPA's 2014 report, and Texas has recently issued a risk value that is three orders of magnitude higher than EPA's to regulate facilities in the state.

The Trump administration has signaled some receptiveness to the chemical and medical device industries' concerns on this point: In December, EPA proposed a regulation governing emissions of

ethylene oxide from miscellaneous organic chemicals plants and requested comment on whether it should base the regulation on a different risk value than the 2014 value from the agency's own scientists.

<https://news.bloombergenvironment.com/environment-and-energy/epa-should-warn-residents-about-ethylene-oxide-cancer-risks-ig>

EPA Should Warn Residents about Ethylene Oxide Cancer Risks: IG

By Amena Saiyid

The EPA has failed to warn residents who live near most plants that emit significant amounts of the carcinogenic gas ethylene oxide about the potential dangers to their health, the agency's inspector general concluded Tuesday.

In fact, the Environmental Protection Agency has met with officials and residents around only nine of the 25 biggest emitters since 2018, when it publicly recognized the need to do so in its update of the National Air Toxics Assessment, the inspector general said.

Ethylene oxide is a flammable, colorless gas with a faintly sweet odor that's used to sterilize medical equipment. It's also used as a building block for other chemicals to make a range of products, including antifreeze, textiles, plastics, detergents, and adhesives.

"While the EPA or state personnel, or both, have met with residents living near nine of the 25 high-priority facilities, communities near 16 facilities have yet to be afforded public meetings or other direct outreach to learn about the health risks and actions being taken to address those risks," the report said.

Eleven of the 25 facilities sterilize medical equipment, and 14 are chemical plants.

The agency said airborne releases of ethylene oxide emissions pose an elevated lifetime cancer risk of at least 100 in one million, a risk level that the EPA generally considers not sufficiently protective of health.

Medical Equipment to Deal with Coronavirus

The timing of Tuesday's announcement coincided with a renewed push for more products during the coronavirus pandemic from plants that use ethylene oxide to sterilize medical equipment.

Both Illinois and Georgia have allowed facilities that had been shut down over concerns about the release of ethylene oxide into communities to resume operations, at least temporarily.

Bloomberg Environment's analysis of the EPA's air toxic emissions data shows that the top 10 ethylene oxide emitters in the nation were actually chemical plants in Louisiana and Texas. Among the top 25 emitters are medical sterilizer plants that use this toxic chemical to sterilize medical equipment in Illinois, New Mexico, and Georgia.

The inspector general said EPA has yet to meet with residents near 16 high-volume ethylene oxide release facilities in Houston, Port Neches, Laredo, and Longview, Texas; St. Gabriel, Taft, Westlake, and Reserve, Louisiana; Santa Teresa, New Mexico; South Charleston, and Institute, West Virginia; Milton, Wisconsin; New Castle, Delaware; Allentown, Pennsylvania; and Anasco, Puerto Rico.

EPA has met residents living near nine facilities in Smyrna and Covington, Georgia; Lakewood, Colorado; Verona and Jackson, Missouri; Willowbrook and Lake County, Illinois; Charleston, South Carolina; and Grand Rapids, Michigan, the report said.

'Of Critical Importance'

In 2016, EPA said ethylene oxide is 30 times more carcinogenic than previously understood.

Based on the updated cancer risk value for ethylene oxide, the latest National Air Toxics Assessment, based on 2014 emissions data, identified ethylene oxide as a new and significant driver of cancer risk. That prompted the agency to start looking at the top 25 highest emitting facilities.

The inspector general recommended Tuesday that the EPA immediately convene a forum for an interactive exchange of information with EPA or state personnel regarding health concerns related to exposure to ethylene oxide.

The agency, however, told the inspector general that it would complete additional investigations of risks in these high areas before holding a forum to communicate these findings.

"It is of critical importance that residents are fully informed of ethylene oxide hazards wherever they exist," Janet Rau, founder of the Georgia chapter of Stop Sterigenics, a citizen-led group that raised alerts about the dangers of ethylene oxide and helped push for a shutdown of facilities, said in a Tuesday email.

The group has opposed the reopening of the medical sterilizer plant by Sterigenics U.S LLC in suburban Atlanta.

IG to EPA: Improve outreach to those exposed to carcinogen

Sean Reilly, E&E News reporter

Published: Tuesday, March 31, 2020

AIR POLLUTION



Protesters outside a Sterigenics International LLC facility, which produces ethylene oxide. Stop Sterigenics/Twitter

EPA urgently needs to do a better job of communicating potential health risks to people living around plants that emit a cancer-causing chemical, ethylene oxide, the agency's inspector general said in a report released today.

Out of 25 plants deemed high priority because ethylene oxide releases are believed to be a significant factor in higher cancer risks, federal or state officials have met with residents living near just nine of those facilities, the IG said in the report, dubbed a "Management Alert."

People living around the other 16 plants "have not been given the same opportunity to interact with federal and state regulators to become informed on the issue," the report says. While there is no legal or policy requirement for EPA to conduct that outreach, the agency's mission statement says it works to ensure that everyone has "accurate information sufficient to effectively participate in managing human health and environmental risks."

The report also notes that EPA already plans to work on better informing communities around five of the 16 facilities.

In a written response, Doug Benevento, EPA's associate deputy administrator, acknowledged the outreach disparity but stopped short of promising immediate action to address it for the other 11.

One of those facilities, for example, is in Wisconsin, where state regulators have questioned the accuracy of EPA's initial assessment of the potential danger to the surrounding community and are now taking a closer look, Benevento said.

"Once we have a more complete assessment risk from the facility, EPA will support, as requested, state-led efforts to communicate risk information to residents in the community," he said.

For others in Louisiana and Texas, Benevento said, "EPA will support, as requested, state-led efforts to communicate risk information to residents in communities near these facilities."

Ethylene oxide, widely used in commercial medical sterilization facilities, is classified as a hazardous pollutant under the Clean Air Act.

The apparent lack of government contact with communities in some states contrasts sharply to the official attention paid to neighborhoods in the Chicago and Atlanta metro areas. There, public uproars have erupted since EPA in 2018 released a National Air Toxics Assessment encompassing a fresh look at ethylene oxide that found the colorless gas was 30 times more carcinogenic to adults than previously believed.

EPA is now in the midst of updating its emissions standards for plants that emit ethylene oxide. The fracas in Georgia and Illinois last year spurred creation of the congressional Ethylene Oxide Task Force, a bipartisan group made up mostly of House members from the two states who are pressing EPA to quickly tighten those thresholds (*E&E Daily*, Dec. 20, 2019).